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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the role of the school counselor in independent schools. It describes the counselor as an analyst who understands the pressures of college admissions, an advocate for the school's college-bound students, an advisor to parents, at times a classroom teacher, and an intermediary between schools and colleges. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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College Counseling in Independent Schools

Background

The number of students in independent schools today makes up scarcely ten percent of the nation's high school population. Nonetheless, these students comprise a significant minority because they tend to be highly motivated, intelligent, and in many cases able to pay the high costs of attending the nation's colleges and universities. Very often independent school students aspire to attend selective colleges, and their presence in freshman classes averages about thirty percent, a number which considerably exceeds their percentage in the national pool of college-bound high school students .

Independent school students are exposed to a rigorous high school curriculum which prepares them well for the challenges of the college classroom. They are, moreover, encouraged to take part in a variety of extracurricular activities at their schools and to develop an appreciation for a shared core of community values. They are also urged to develop leadership skills which will eventually enable them to play dynamic and useful roles in our society as adults.

Most independent schools are deeply committed to providing an education which is noted for its quality as well as the diversity of its student body. The charter of Phillips Exeter Academy, for instance, enjoins the school to seek "youth from every quarter," so that it may adequately instruct them in the "great and real business of living." In recent years the quest for diversity has led to the inclusion of a number of minority and disadvantaged students in independent schools. Alumni support and endowment funds have enabled many schools to assemble diverse student bodies which are similar in percentages to that of many colleges.

The diversity, ability, and ambition of independent school students inevitably focuses their attention on gaining admission to selective and challenging colleges. Consequently their college counselors have multiple roles to play as they assist them on their way.

The Counselor as Analyst

The initial role of the counselor is that of an ***analyst***, who must understand the pressures of the present college admissions system. Colleges have launched intensive marketing campaigns to attract a greater diversity of students. Ten years ago fifty percent of the freshman classes of the most selective colleges were composed of independent school students. Today that figure is thirty percent or less. The resultant pressure on independent school students to find places in selective colleges, and on their counselors who try to assist them, has risen markedly in recent years.

A second pressure which elicits the analyst's skills comes from the economic realm. The rising cost of a college education in the past decade has further intensified the pressure on college counselors in independent schools to make it possible for their students to be admitted to very selective colleges. The pricing strategy on the part of colleges is to enhance their prestige by raising their prices. From the point of view of students' families, the increased cost of a college education has engendered an attitude that a college education is something of special value and, therefore, measurable by the *name* of the particular college or university. The college cost factor produces a simplification of the college admissions process into a sort of service for which the parent is paying, the result of which will be the *delivery* of a prestige college by the college counselor at the end of the student's education at an independent school.

The Counselor as Advocate

The independent school counselor, like all counselors, is also an ***advocate*** who desires to support his/her intelligent, motivated, and well-intentioned counselees vigorously as they seek to gain admission to challenging colleges. In independent schools the counselor-to-student ratio is often low enough for the counselor and student to spend a good deal of time together and come to know each other well. The relationships which are often established enable the counselor to secure the trust of the student and to play an influential and educational role in shaping the student's attitudes toward academic, personal, and moral questions. In turn, this relationship enables the counselor to represent the personal and academic qualities of their students very vividly to college admissions officers. On the other hand, independent school college admissions counselors are generally deeply committed to the idea of educating the "whole" student and encouraging counselees and families to resist the competitive impetus of the marketplace and look at the broader question of which colleges or universities would best suit the needs of the student.

The Counselor as Advisor to Parents

In addition to the pressures of the college admissions marketplace on independent school counselors and their extensive involvement with students, these counselors are generally more involved with parents than their public school counterparts. In this role as ***advisor to parents***, counselors have to keep in mind that, on average, seventy percent of the annual budget of an independent school is provided for by tuition paid by parents! More important is that parents often choose to send their children to independent schools because they are deeply committed

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to the notion that the development of human values, as well as intellectual skills, is an important part of their child's education. Counselors and parents frequently find themselves discussing together these shared values and the challenges of parenting along with college admissions strategies.

When an independent school is a boarding school, college counselors frequently function, along with other faculty , as surrogate parents. Counselors are directly engaged in helping students inventory their academic and extracurricular interests, evaluate their personal strengths, and search for, choose, and gain admission to appropriate colleges and universities.

Whether the counselor is operating in "loco parentis," or as an advisor to a student who attends an independent school by day and lives with his or her parents in the evening, the counselor needs to understand what the parents expect of both the student and the school. In addition, the counselor must ensure that parents are made an integral part of the decision-making process. Newsletters, telephone calls, and office conferences are invariably a part of that process.

The Counselor as Teacher

Many college counselors are also ***classroom teachers*** and bring from that experience a deep commitment to college counseling as an educational enterprise. Many work extremely hard as counselors to stress the skills and the insights which can be gained by students as they move through the college selection process. Independent school counselors want students to develop self assessment skills, and to be able to analyze college literature and audio-visual materials critically. Counselors must help students analyze the objective data about the difficulty of admission to particular schools, and then establish a range of choices. They also want students to match themselves with the academic and extracurricular programs, as well as the philosophies of the respective colleges they choose, and to learn to present themselves cogently and effectively in interviews, in correspondence, and in their admissions applications.

College counselors in independent schools frequently find themselves involved in teaching extracurricular activities such as sports, music, or drama. Boarding school counselors are able to describe students as individuals on the basis of knowing them in their dormitories, and watching them interact with other students. This invariably redounds to the student's advantage in the college admissions quest.

The Counselor as Intermediary

The final role of college counselors in independent schools are as ***Intermediaries*** in the relationship between school and college.Many independent schools have had a longstanding tradition of sending a number of their graduates to particular colleges or universities. That pattern has now changed, but the contacts with colleges and universities endure. The result is that many independent school counselors are well known and respected by admissions officers. College admissions officers tend to rely on the judgment of counselors known to them in occasional instances where a student is at the margin of their admissions criteria.

Beyond the formal admissions process, many college admissions officers are invited to speak to students and parent groups at independent schools. The result of these relationships between counselor and college admissions officer sometimes results in a misconception on the part of parents and the public. They may view the counselor as a broker in the admissions process, and expect him or her to be able to guarantee admission to a particular college with which the school has a supposedly "close" relationship. These expectations are almost never fulfilled. College admissions officers across the nation have constructed a very fair and open admissions process. Counselors in independent schools often have to spend a significant amount of their time and energy educating parents about this reality. They must convince parents to take a broader view and not connect the cost of their child's education with a particular "result," i.e., entry to a prestige college.

Conclusion

Counselors in independent schools invariably argue that the result of an independent school education should be an education of the "whole" person rather than admission to a particular college, and that both school and parents should focus on ensuring that the student's self esteem be protected, if not expanded, in the process of clearing the college admissions hurdle. As America continues to seek new ways to preserve democracy and provide quality within its educational system, college counseling in independent schools provides a fascinating challenge and opportunity.

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